Winter 1986

Evangelical Equality: Religious Consecration, Mission, and Witness Part 1

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Sandra M. Schneiders: Evangelical Equality: Religious Consecration, Mission, and Witness

By challenging the image of the Church as a hierarchical institution, the theology of the Church as the People of God is transforming our understanding of the differing vocations of her members.

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PART I: FRIENDSHIP IN GOD: THE BIBLICAL BASIS OF CHRISTIAN

EQUALITY

ONE of the most important realizations that the inner church tensions of the last twenty years has brought home to us is the governing role that ecclesiology plays in our understanding of virtually every aspect of Christian life. Prior to Vatican II, we understood ecclesiology as the clear and indisputable description of a fairly static and unchanging institution. Following the lead of Pius XII, whose groundbreaking encyclical *Mystici Corporis*(1) revived the biblical-approach to the mystery of God's People, the Council evoked a variety of Old and New Testament images by which to suggest the richness of that complex reality we call church. Among those images, such as Body of Christ, Spouse of Christ, Temple of God, and Household of the Faith,(2) one has appealed with particular power to the imagination of twentieth century Catholics. This image, the People of God (LG II), and the reasons for its appeal, will be our primary concern in what follows.

MODELS OF THE CHURCH: PARADIGM SHIFTS

Shortly after Vatican II, American theologian Avery Dulles published a book which fascinated theologians and laity alike. That book, *Models of the Church*,(3) shed light on the confusingly rich ecclesiology of the Council. By explaining the role of the theological imagination in the development of our understanding of the church, Dulles helped us to see that, as a community, we have not always functioned in terms of a single ecclesiology. On the contrary, in the course of history many different models of church have successively held sway. What is particularly characteristic of our own time, is the fact that a variety of ecclesiologies is operating simultaneously. It is even sometimes the case that the same individual functions at different times in terms of different models of church. Dulles' description and evaluation of these diverse models — church as institution, as herald, as mystical communion, as sacrament, as servant, and his most recent and adequate model of church as community of disciples,(4) helped us realize the deeply mysterious character of the ecclesial community which our virtually exclusive reliance on the institutional model had obscured for many centuries. He also helped us realize that no one of us can intellectually master nor exhaustively express that mystery. Overinsistence on any one model shackles our theological imagination, impoverishes our ecclesiology, and thus cripples our practice of the Gospel.

Most of us are well aware of these developments and have learned to recognize the operation of diverse ecclesiologies: in our own thinking, in our conversations with others in the church with whom we may disagree on important issues, and in official documents. This diversity, as we well know, is both liberating and tension-producing. Not everyone holds his

or her ecclesiology lightly! There are still many Catholics at both ends of the ideological spectrum — clergy and laity alike — who feel called by God to excommunicate in one way or another those who operate within a conception of church different from their own. This should not surprise us, for we all grew up in a very tightly organized institution in which we were taught that diversity was tantamount to heresy. The distortion of spirit that that education inflicted on us is still very much with us. A sign of hope in our own days is the increasing realization, especially among the laity, that pluralism is a sign of health in a community of adults, and that the attempt to suppress responsible dissent is not only futile but destructive because it frustrates the church's search for the wisdom necessary to live the Gospel in a new time. As a church we are growing up, but not without all the pain of a long overdue adolescence.

I take for granted, then, our common realization that ecclesiology is not an exhaustive and univocal description of an unchanging institution but the work of the theological imagination entering speculatively and contemplatively into what the Council called the mystery of communion between God and humanity (cf. LG I:1). I would like, therefore, to leave the level of models of the church and move one level deeper to explore the Gospel principle which underlies the inclusive model, People of God, because I believe it is this principle which has been the implicit source of energy for our re-thinking of consecration, witness, and mission.

EVANGELICAL EQUALITY: THE THEOLOGICAL DOCTRINE

The hypothesis I propose is that the appeal of the People of God image lies in its revaluation in our historical context of what I shall call "evangelical equality" as the principle of relationships among the members of the church. Evangelical equality is not to be confused or equated with civil, social, or political equality. It is rather, as I will try to show, solidarity in friendship among the disciples of Jesus who have been made children of the same divine Parent through the blood of Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Called to one and the same holiness (cf. LG IV:32; V:41), all members of Christ share a common identity and vocation as Christians. Any distinctions among them are secondary, provisional, and relative — justified only to the extent that they serve the unity of the church (cf. Eph. 4:4-16).

Because of the centuries-old adoption by the institutional church of the socio-political forms of the societies in which she found herself,(5) the radical Gospel teaching on evangelical equality has been greatly obscured. The divinizing of human authority in the Roman Empire, the opulent benevolent despotism of the Byzantine Empire, feudal paternalism, and the rigid

class structure and ontologizing of role distinctions in the divine right monarchies of Europe have all, in the course of history, contributed not only to the external structure of the church but also, unfortunately, to its self-understanding. Since at least the 1950s, theologians have been calling into question — in ever more radical ways — the power-structure conception of the church (6) while challenging Catholics, both ordained and lay, to take seriously their baptismal call to become a community of believers called together to the task of evangelization.

Hesitantly but repeatedly, Vatican II addressed to the ecclesial imagination the challenge to evangelical equality. In the documents on ecumenism (*Unitatis Redintegratio*) and on relations with non-Christians (*Nostra Aetate*), the Council renounced the superior stance that for centuries had characterized the Roman Church in its relations with non-Catholics. It recognized that dialogue, which is by definition a conversation between mutually respectful equals, is the appropriate way of relating to others whose sincere beliefs, even if different from ours, are worthy of respect.

In *The Declaration on Religious Freedom (Dignitatis Humanae)*, probably the first major contribution to ecclesial self-understanding by the American church, the Council abandoned the centuries-old position that those in possession of the truth had the right and even the duty to impose it on others. Faith was recognized as a free response to revelation which, in the nature of the case, cannot be forced. Underlying this implicit repudiation of Crusades, Inquisition, censorship, and other forms of religious coercion was an emerging realization that each human being stands before God as ultimately responsible for him or herself. No one has been given the right to exercise domination over the conscience of another.

The *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)* dramatically reversed the Church's long-held stance of superiority and adversity toward the secular order. It declared the solidarity of believers with all humanity (GS Intro. 1) and recognized that it was called upon not only to teach the world but also to learn from it; that the church's role is not to rule, but to collaborate with the people and institutions of society in making this earth a fitting home for humanity and thus the locus for the Reign of God (cf. GS IV:40-44). In that same Constitution, the church courageously condemned all forms of discrimination, even those which, unfortunately, are still to be found within the church itself, as contrary to the will of God (GS II:29).

In recognizing that collegiality and subsidiarity are the appropriate principles for the functioning of the church on all levels (cf. LG III:22-24; 28-29), the Council evoked the

Gospel vision of equality in yet another sphere, that of ecclesiastical leadership.

The conciliar documents on the church (*Lumen Gentium*), the liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*), and the Apostolate of the Laity (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*) contain striking affirmations of the equality and shared responsibility of all members of the People of God (cf. LG IV:32, AA I:2). The Council reaffirmed, after centuries of the sacralized classicism which had greatly reduced the activity and initiative of the laity, that the equality of the members of the church is rooted in baptism (cf. LG IV:32). The baptized exercise their Christ-bestowed identity in the liturgical assembly and mission in church and world — not by permission, nor subject to the initiative or control of the ordained, but by virtue of their incorporation into Christ and according to the gifts they have received from the Spirit (cf. AA I:1-2).

HIERARCHY AND SOLIDARITY

As we know well, each of the conciliar documents also contains emphatic reassertions of the hierarchical structure of the Church (see esp . LG III), and of the "essential difference" between the common and ministerial priesthoods (LG II:10), as well as resounding claims to papal and episcopal power and authority — at times presented in such absolute and unaccountable terms that they seem to conflict with rather than to complement the renewed vision of Gospel equality.(7) But we also do well to take a lesson in document reading from biblical scholarship. Biblical scholars have learned that, in the Gospels, the original revelation of Jesus is to be found precisely in those passages of the Gospels which do *not* reflect the first century Jewish milieu in which he lived, but which *do* challenge, oppose, and break through the religious and cultural givens of his times. In like manner, students of the conciliar documents need to recognize the revelatory importance of the breakthrough insights of the Council on the Church's vocation to solidarity — even though these insights are imbedded in predictable reiterations of time-honored claims to superiority and power. In any case, it is certainly these new insights into Gospel equality which have moved to liturgical and ministerial action, in ways both exciting and unsettling, large numbers of Catholics who, prior to the Council, were the very incarnation of Pius X's distressing declaration in *Vehementer Nos* that ". . . in the hierarchy alone resides the power and authority necessary to move and direct all the members of the society [Church] to its end. As for the many [laity], they have no other right than to let themselves be guided and so follow their pastors in docility."(8)

EVANGELICAL AND SECULAR EQUALITY: THE GOSPEL ACCOUNT

What, then, is this evangelical equality which the Council repeatedly, if somewhat tentatively, evoked, and which has so mobilized post-conciliar Catholics to ecclesial participation? Its first and most striking characteristic is its essential difference from secular notions of equality. Jesus revealed something altogether new about the way the human family, called to discipleship through rebirth in the Spirit, is to live. The secular notion of equality is rooted in a basic acceptance of the superior/ inferior paradigm for human relations. In a secular democracy, equality consists in all members having equal access to and opportunity to compete for the superior positions and roles in a social structure in which someone will always be at the top and someone at the bottom. The task of government is to keep the competition fair. But such a system necessarily involves all participants in never-ending competition for the places at the top. There is probably no more terrifying illustration of the impossibility of genuine solidarity in a society of competitors than the arms race between the two superpowers. Neither can feel secure until it is superior to the other; neither will ever accept the superiority of the other; so the race goes on.

Jesus message is radically different because he rejected superiority/inferiority as the paradigm for human relations. In some of the most bafflingly original passages of the Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples two things: first, they must not only not seek to be superior to others but must *actively seek the lowest place*; second, they must *not* recognize the *claims* to superiority of those who attempt to keep the power structures in place and the competition going. Jesus himself set the example in both areas with a consistency that leaves no doubt about the centrality of this new kind of equality to the Gospel message.

Jesus repeatedly rebuked his disciples for their striving for superiority over one another (cf. Mk. 9:33-37; 10:35-38), over those who did not accept Jesus (cf. Lk. 10:49-56), over the sick and disabled (cf. Lk. 18:39), over women (Jn. 12:5-8), and over children (Mt. 14:13-15). But even more astoundingly, he told them that they must seek the lowest place in social situations (cf. Lk. 14:7-11); they must seek to be servants-not only of those more honorable or powerful than themselves-but of all (Mk. 10:43-44; Mt. 20:26-28). They must seek to be the least rather than the greatest (Lk. 22:26; 9:48). They must, in sum, become as little children if they wished to participate in the Reign of God (Mt. 18:1-4). Now a child in ancient societies was devoid of rights, could be disposed of according to the will of its father, and was socially and civilly an “it” until it became an adult. To become as a little child was to choose the lowest possible status in the superiority/ inferiority structure of social organization.(9)

Furthermore, Jesus instructed his disciples to avoid all the known techniques for establishing

what sociologists call “social distance” between superiors and inferiors in a social structure. They were not to broaden their phylacteries or lengthen their tassels, i.e., to use religious dress in order to attract recognition. They were not to use titles such as “father,” “master,” or “rabbi,” which require others to recognize one’s superior status. They were not to take the front seats in religious assemblies which symbolize superior roles in the community (Mt. 23:5-8). In sum, they were not to use the pretext of service to exercise dominion over each other as the pagans did (Lk. 22:24-26).

JESUS AS MODEL

Jesus himself modeled what he taught. He was born into a subject race, the son of a poor artisan in a remote village. He was biologically barred from the priesthood because he was not of the tribe of Levi. He was uneducated, and thus, unqualified for the role of scribe, pharisee, or rabbi. Most significant perhaps, is the fact that Jesus did not take the only road open to him for attaining some measure of power in his society. By not marrying and founding a family, he renounced the considerable authority which he could have exercised as the head of a household in a patriarchal society.

He was baptized among sinners and associated himself with them — both by sharing table fellowship with them and by his own breaking of the Law in obedience to his conscience.(10) He chose to associate publicly with every type of person deemed unclean (cf. Mk. 1:40-42); with heretics (Jn. 4:7-26) and pagans (Jn. 4:46-53); with women (Lk. 10:38-42) and children (Lk. 18:15-17) and slaves (Lk. 7:1-10). He made Samaritans (Lk. 10:29-37), publicans (Lk. 18:9-14), prostitutes (Lk. 7:36-50), and pagans (Lk. 7:9) the heroes of his stories and the beneficiaries of his miracles. In short, he carried to its ultimate limits the work begun by God in sending the only Son to become one of us. Jesus chose to be the equal, the friend, of the most lowly members of the human family.

But Jesus neither counseled nor modeled abjection. While respecting both the Law and the leaders of his people, he reserved to himself the right to follow his own conscience even when it conflicted with Torah or tradition (Mk. 3:1-5; 2:18-28). When provoked by the righteous to condemn the sinner, he enraged and shamed the self-appointed judges by his defense of the guilty (cf. Lk. 7:36-50). When falsely accused by the religious leaders, he demanded that they either substantiate their claims or withdraw them (Jn. 18:19-23). When Pilate flaunted his authority over Jesus, Jesus replied that Pilate had only the power God gave him (Jn. 19:10-11), that is, power to kill the body but impotence over the spirit. Betrayed by the hierarchy of his own religious community and executed by the power of the

state, Jesus died victorious. Claiming that no one took his life from him, he laid it down of his own accord for those he loved (Jn. 10:18). Throughout his life and teaching Jesus urged his disciples to claim for themselves that same freedom in the face of law, that same dignity under oppression, that same fearlessness in the face of power (cf. Lk. 12:4-5). The refusal to dominate others must be further complemented by the refusal to be dominated.

CALLED TO BE FRIENDS

The paradigm of human relations which Jesus proposed, both by his life and by his teaching, is one of evangelical equality. If all seek the lowest place, and if none recognize the existence or legitimacy of any other place, then all will find themselves together at the "bottom." This leaves God alone as a "superior" in relation to human beings. But God, in Jesus, has also chosen to seek the lowest place, namely, union with us (Lk. 22:27). Whether we interpret the Incarnation as God becoming poor like us or as God enriching us with divinity, the astounding message is the divine choice of equality with humanity. That divine choice of equality is the foundation and principle of the unity among Jesus' disciples. The ecclesial result of evangelical equality is Christian solidarity, that mutual interdependence that can put every gift at the service of the community, that can sustain mutual challenge and correction for the good of all, that can enhance the dignity of each without abasing any, that can govern itself without recourse to coercion or violence.

The name of this kind of solidarity, according to the Gospel, is friendship. Jesus, on the night before he died, summed up the witness his life had given to God's designs for humanity when he said to his disciples, "I no longer call you servants . . . but I have called you friends because everything I have heard [i.e., received] from my Father I have shared with you" (Jn. 15:15). As the ancient Greek philosophers knew, friendship is possible only among equals. The amazing choice of God is friendship with us. And Jesus final and only command is that we love one another as he has loved us, i.e., with the love of friendship (Jn. 15:12).

CONCLUSION

Both theologians and non-specialists alike have carried the breakthrough insights of Vatican II into the nature of the church as People of God and Community of Disciples well beyond the tentative suggestions in the Council documents. As a result, the developments in our understanding of ourselves as Church have been deeper and more rapid than anyone could have predicted, and have brought us closer to what appears to be Jesus' intent — that we

function as cooperators or equals in every aspect of Christian life — not as competitors.

In sum, evangelical quality is the basis of that kind of community solidarity in friendship which the world cannot even understand — much less achieve — and which cannot be explained by anything except the love of the indwelling Spirit. For that very reason it constitutes the primary witness in the world to the salvific love of God revealed in Jesus. Jesus prayed that we might be one, not in a class society held together by the coercion of the powerful, but as Jesus and his Father are one-in perfect equality and indestructible friendship. That oneness, he said, will witness to the world that God has sent the Son to redeem us (Jn. 17:21).

(To be continued)

NOTES

1. Pope Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis*, June 29, 1943: AAS 193-248.
2. Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 1:4-6. All references in the text to documents of the Second Vatican Council are denoted by the initials of the Latin title of the document followed by chapter and/or paragraph number(s) according to *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. W.M. Abbott (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966).
3. A. Dulles, *Models of the Church* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974).
4. A. Dulles, *A Church to Believe In: Discipleship and the Dynamics of Freedom* (New York: Crossroad, 1982). See esp. pp 1-8.
5. On history of ministry see E. Schillebeeckx, *The Church with A Human Face: A New and Expanded Theology of Ministry*, tr. J. Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1985), esp. Part 3. See also T.F. O'Meara, *Theology of Ministry* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), esp. chapter 5.
6. Cf. H. Kung, *The Church*, tr. R. and R. Ockenden (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967); A. Lemaire, *Les Ministeres dans L'Eglise* (Paris: Centurion, 1974); K. Rahner, *The Shape of the Church to Come*, tr. E. Quinn (New York: Seabury, 1974); L. Boff, *Church: Charism and Power: Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church*, tr. J.W. Dierschmeier (New York: Crossroad, 1985).
7. Cf. A. Dulles, "Authority: The Divided Legacy," *Commonweal* 112 (July 12, 1985): 400-403.
8. Pope Pius X, *Vehementer Nos*, February 11, 1906: ASS 39 (1906): 3-16. Citation from 8-9.
9. See E. Schussler-Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), esp. pp. 147-151 on the child as

paradigm of discipleship.

10. I have developed this point in greater detail in “Towards a Theology of Religious Obedience,” *Starting Points: Six Essays Based on the Experience of U.S. Women Religious* (Washington, D.C.: Leadership Conference of Women Religious, 1980): 59-85. See esp. pp. 75-82.

Filed Under: Winter - No. 4